

Decolonization of Mind in Amitav Ghosh's Writing: A Postcolonial Study of *The Shadow*

Lines

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to explore the spirit of decolonization through the representation of the characters' sensibility that creates the room in their mind for the sense of nationalism against the Eurocentric culture. Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* has tried to restore the national identity of the characters with a sense of liberalism and universal brotherhood. Through the presentation of the characters with their sentiments, he obliquely satirizes the lines that create the gap among the nations. In this novel, Tha'mma, a major figure, tries to free her own nation from the despotic clutch of British rule by showing her earnest desire to contribute in the activities of national leaders, where as Tridib and the narrator believe in their intellectual imagination that is far beyond the grip of all kind of boundaries constructed by the imperialistic demand of the Eurocentric zeal. Again, Ila, another character of the novel, tends to adopt the western culture but is criticised by Tha'mma for her blindly following nature of western culture. However, the characters in their presentation bring forth the sense of nationality to strengthen the decolonizing spirit of mind.

Keywords: Decolonization, Eurocentric, Nationalism, Liberalism, Intellectual imagination.

The term ‘decolonized’ is popular among activists of colour, yet is very loaded and hard to pin down. It has been used to free minds but it also has divided communities. The process of “decolonized” should not place colonization as the central point of our culture, nor should it romanticize our indigenous past. These trains of thought perpetuate the point of view of the dominant culture of today. Rather “decolonization” should be a process of changing a way we view the world. Frantz Fanon wrote- “Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land and from our mind as well.” The residue of colonization allows for the continued stratification of people. Rejecting labels, selfishness, egotism, a black and white binary discrimination judgements are, instead, traits of the decolonized. A decolonized mind defends culture by defending the root of who we are. A person with decolonized mind accepts their past, loves their present and creates their future, regardless of what stands in their way.

The Shadow Lines is an attempt by Amitav Ghosh to show the Blurring of lines or borders between East and West, castes and religious beliefs through an unconventional postcolonial novel which shows the colonised travelling and moving to and from the coloniser’s territory. But the instigation to present such a world sans boundaries, ironically enough, comes through a personal experience of communal riots. The quest for identity and the confrontation towards divided-selves with nationalist spirit help the characters to get the meaning of boundary, created by the British Empire, through multi-layered experiences.

Through their experiences, the characters, especially Tha'mma, Tridib and the narrator transcend themselves beyond boundaries and achieve their own real selves and position.

The terms nation and nationalism despite their common usage, have always been enigmatic terms. The proliferation of theories like post-colonialism, multiculturalism, globalization and postmodernism have upheld or defied national identities and boundaries. We are living in the tempestuous uncertainties where on one hand the world is becoming footloose. The question of avoiding nations and nationalism and shifting fixed identities are finding an echo in contemporary literature.

The term nationalism can refer to an ideology, a sentiment, a form of culture, or a social movement that focuses on the nation. "Nationalism was, first of all a doctrine of popular sovereignty. The people must be liberated - that is free from any external constraints; they must determine their own destiny and be masters in their house; they must control their own resources; they must obey only their inner voice... The people must be united; they must dissolve all internal divisions; they must be gathered together in a single historic territory, a homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a single public culture" (Hutchinson and Smith 4). While there is significant debate over the historical origins of nations, nearly all specialists accept that nationalism is a modern phenomenon originating in Europe.

The Shadow Lines focuses on the narrator's family in Calcutta and Dhaka and their connection with an English family in London. The relationship between narrator's grandmother and her animosity towards her sister's granddaughter Ila emblemizes the conflict between nationalism and migrant cosmopolitanism, even as it makes visible the limits and failures of both these middle class women. *The Shadow Lines* is an extreme example of the tendency of

crossing of frontiers -- especially those of nationality, culture and language. The novel focuses on nationalism, the shadow lines we draw between people and nations, which is both an absurd illusion and source of terrifying violence. *The Shadow Lines* sets out to uncover the confronted, fearful, suppressed memories in an attempt to unsettle the simplified seamless narrative of national identity.

The unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* comes in contact with different, often contradictory, versions of national and cultural identity through the main characters in the novel – his grandmother Tha'mma, his cousin Ila and his uncle Tridib and Robi. Growing up in a middle class professional family in Calcutta, the narrator acquires the sensibility of a metropolitan, bi-lingual, English speaking and a post-colonial subject. His interaction with his cousin and uncles whose fathers are globe-trotting diplomats and his own stint in London for research work make his attitude and approach to issues of nation and cultures more cosmopolitan. However, one of the most powerful influences on his life is his grandmother who is fiercely independent, militantly nationalist woman.

Tha'mma's settled convictions about nationality, religion and belonging start getting disturbed when she returns to her birth place in Dhaka, after a gap of many years, and for the first time after partition. She is startled when told that she would not be able to see any dividing distinction between India and East Pakistan from the plane since in the modern world borders are crossed within airports when disembarkation forms are filled out. The narrator says, "My grandmother's eyes widened and she slumped back in her chair... It had suddenly occurred to her that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on that form... and at that moment she had not been able quite to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at

odds with her nationality" (TSL-155). Tha'mma's perplexity is paradigmatic for millions of people on the sub-continent, and it is an attempt to deal with the awkward situation that the discourse of nationhood places emphasis on the corporeality of space and distance, and places its faith in the infallibility of the shadow lines of borders. Functioning authentically to Tha'mma's ideology of linking religion and nationality to nationhood is her uncle who refuses to be rescued from the Muslim East Pakistan in order to live in India with his Hindu relatives. "I don't believe in this India-Shindia", he says, "it's all very well, you are going now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere...I was born here, and I'll die here"(TSL-216).

In contrast to Tha'mma nationalist militant fervour and hysteria, Ghosh presents the quiet strength and sanity of the narrator's uncle, Robi. He is an upright, principled, moral man who has not been swayed by socio-political pressures, but who is at the same time intrinsically Indian in his culture and values. Born in the post-colonial era, Robi grows up with the certitude of a unitary identity as a citizen of independent, secular India, and does not have to confront the necessarily fractured sense of self like those who experienced decolonization and partition.

The senseless violence that kills Robi's brother and makes him victim to mob fury becomes part of his identity as post-colonial Indian. After relating the incident of Tridib's death, Robi articulates his formulation of freedom and nationhood, "Free...You know, if you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspapers...dead people in Assam, the north east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura—people shot by terrorist and separatists and the army and the police,...everyone's doing it to be free...Why don't they draw thousands of little lines...and give every little place a new name? What would it change? ...How can anyone divide a

memory?" (TSL-247). The futility of these political boundaries is realised by Tha'mma at Tridib's death. Dhaka was her place of birth and as a young girl she had thought of fighting for the freedom of East Bengal. But the very people and nation for whom she had been willing to sacrifice herself are the cause of her sorrow in 1964. The struggle against the British in Dhaka had been motivated by feelings of nationalism towards Bangladesh.

The narrator's grandmother thinks of freedom as political freedom from colonisation, for which she could readily sacrifice her life: "I would have done anything to be free, even killed for it" (TSL, p. 89).

Having witnessed the violent anti-colonial struggle of India, she is against Ila's living in London, as she does not belong there and has not fought for the freedom of that country as they have. She believes in the existence of physical borders and nourishes them. The characters of Tha'mma and Ila raise the strained relationship between nationalism and individual freedom.

The decolonized people, with all their complexities and traumas, caused by the extreme colonial rule, can never meet the colonizer on equal terms. The colonized people try to associate with the colonizer to boost their own ego and try to embrace their world, which seems to them not only glamorous but places them above the common natives. With the emergence of the new nation-states, the colonized show a tendency to forget the colonial past. They try to upgrade their sense of nationalism by reviving their native culture. The desire to forget the past in the postcolonial era is symptomatic of the colonized people's need to make a new start and to erase the painful memories of colonial subordination.

Ghosh attempts a critique of the shadow lines of borders as signifiers of freedom and nationhood. Through his critique of Tha'mma's version of nationalism and Robi's rejection of

the dominant ideology of freedom, Ghosh points to the limitations of realizing identity through the discourse of the nationhood. He articulates the need to conceptualize issues of identity in terms of larger cultural and historical sensibilities. Ghosh seems to be indicating that Indian nationalism omitted the problematic issue of gender, cultural ideology and mental hegemony.

The Shadow Lines reveals the fragility of Partition's border between nations as etched out in maps, and of the frontiers policed by nation states that separate people, communities, and families. He suggests that the nature of boundaries understood through the metaphor of looking glass: the national border between the people of India and West Pakistan resembles the mirror's boundary in which self and reflected other are the same.

Thus, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* claims a unique position in the postcolonial literature that explores the hybridity of post-colonial nationality and migration. Ghosh, instead, points to the transnationality of community and memory through the critique of the gender-violence inflicted on minor bodies and minor lives by the structures and politics of both nationalism and globalization. As such, they are interventions that urge us to re-narrate national modernity as marked by the failure of state institutions and by the persistence of transnational memory and modes of community.

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